

Creating Flow

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director | 4 min read · May 2026

There's a reason young people will spend five hours on a game without noticing the time pass — and struggle to focus for five minutes on a worksheet.

It isn't laziness, or a short attention span, or a generational problem with screens. It's that the game is doing something the worksheet isn't. It's creating the conditions for Flow.

What Flow Actually Is

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi spent decades studying the states in which people perform at their best and feel most engaged. He called this state Flow — the experience of being so absorbed in an activity that everything else falls away. Time distorts. Self-consciousness disappears. The work and the person doing it become, temporarily, the same thing.

It's not a mystical state. It's a specific set of conditions — and they can be designed for.

The Eight Conditions for Flow

Csikszentmihalyi identified eight criteria that, when present, create the conditions for Flow:

1. **The task is achievable** — there's a genuine chance of completing it with effort
2. **Full concentration is possible** — the environment supports deep focus
3. **Clear goals** — the person knows what they're working towards
4. **Immediate feedback** — they can tell how they're doing in real time
5. **Deep but effortless involvement** — engagement that removes the noise of everyday worry
6. **A sense of control** — the person feels agency over what they're doing
7. **Loss of self-consciousness** — concern for how they appear fades; a stronger sense of self emerges afterwards
8. **Altered sense of time** — time either speeds up or slows down

Most, if not all, of these conditions need to be present simultaneously. Miss several and the state doesn't emerge.

Why This Matters for Outdoor and Experiential Learning

Games create Flow almost automatically — they're designed to. The challenge scales with the player, feedback is instant, goals are clear, and the environment is controlled.

Outdoor and experiential programmes have the same potential — but it doesn't happen by accident. An activity that's too easy produces boredom. One that's too difficult produces anxiety. Neither is Flow. The skill of the facilitator is in finding and maintaining the narrow channel between the two — where challenge and capability are genuinely matched.

When it works, participants aren't thinking about lunch, or what their friends are doing, or how they look. They're in it. That's when the deepest learning happens — not because we've instructed it, but because we've created the space for it.

Designing for Flow

Match the challenge to the group — not to an average, but to individuals. Flow is personal. What creates it for one person may overwhelm another.

Build in immediate feedback — through the activity itself, through the environment, or through brief check-ins. People need to be able to gauge their own progress in real time.

Remove unnecessary noise — social pressure, ambiguous instructions, and unclear goals all pull people out of absorption. Simplify the conditions. Let the challenge do the work.

When participants are fully in it, stop talking. The experience is the teacher.

Mike Thomas

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